

The Salayta District Church in Madaba Preliminary Report

By

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In August, 1972 the proposed development of an area in the Salayta District of Madaba necessitated the investigation of the area by the Department of Antiquities. This investigation was encouraged by reports by some local residents that many years ago they had seen a large mosaic floor in this area. The existence of antiquities were further indicated by architectural remains scattered in the area. Particularly striking was a row of columns placed next to each other as a row of match-sticks. Likewise, bases and capitals of pillars could be seen re-used in recent constructions.

In the light of the above considerations archaeological work commenced at the site near the end of August, 1972 and continued until the middle of October. The work was carried on by the Department of Antiquities under the supervision of Dr. Bastiaan Van Elderen, director of the American Center of Oriental Research in Amman, with the assistance of Mahmoud Rusan, inspector of antiquities in Madaba and Samir Ghishan of Madaba. Dr. Bert De Vries of the American Center of Oriental Research prepared the drawings and plans of the church. The full cooperation of the Department of Antiquities and the services of its photography section were

greatly appreciated. A word of thanks is due to Mr. Yusef Alami, acting director of the Department at the time, for his assistance and encouragement.

The Excavation

Unfortunately, stratigraphic excavation of the site was impossible. Although there was about a meter of debris on the floor level of the church, it was for the most part modern fill deposited during the recent construction of neighbouring buildings. Consequently, only some general conclusions about the area's history can be made. The very limited amount of Islamic pottery agrees with the known abandonment of Madaba during much of the Islamic period. The presence of some Umayyad sherds testifies to an occupation of the area during the seventh and eighth centuries.⁽¹⁾

A sounding was made in the apse area of the church since the position of a section of a column below the floor level aroused curiosity. It appears that at an earlier time someone had trenched along the foundation of the apse wall and rolled the column section into the trench. However, in the area undisturbed by this late trench numerous Nabataean sherds were found. This agrees with the known history

¹ This is also indicated by churches in Madaba with mosaics dated in the latter part of the seventh century (e.g., the Chapel of the Virgin Mary).

of Madaba. Occupation of the site in the Roman period was also indicated by sherds of terra sigillata ware in this sounding and mixed in the debris. Likewise, in the debris elsewhere there were many sherds of Byzantine pottery

The Architecture

The building exposed by this excavation was a basilica-type Byzantine church. The building is 32 meters long and 19 meters wide. The walls on all four sides were identified, although the south and west walls had been integrated into modern walls and therefore could not be fully exposed. The outside faces of the walls (about a meter high) give evidence of expert workmanship in the finely bossed stones closely fitted together (Plate II A, foreground; Plate II B.)

The foundation and one course of the apse wall are preserved. This also was well-constructed of dressed stones. Only one pillar base was found *in situ* near the north side of the apse, although numerous bases are found in the area. Nevertheless, the location of the two rows of pillars separating the nave from the side aisles was indicated by the stylobate or foundation wall on which the pillar bases rested which was identified in a number of places (Plate I).

The plan of the church is symmetrically laid out. The side aisles are 3.50 meters wide and the nave is 7.00 meters wide. Two small square rooms flank the apse on the north and south sides. No traces of the vestibule or narthex of the church could be identified. The remains of modern buildings, although presently abandoned, are found in the western portion of the church (Plate II, A background). These structures re-used the western wall of the church and perhaps removed the inner walls of the narthex.

In this re-use of the western wall of the church, the western entrance was blocked up. However, the outline of this doorway became visible after the removal of the modern plaster face. Further probing and removal of some stones revealed the threshold, door sockets, and door stops (Plate III A). A trench was dug along the outside of the wall (in the modern street) and the same outline revealed (the modern street level is about a meter higher than the floor level of the church).

Most of the south wall of the church has been built over by a modern wall. However, in a part which is currently abandoned, it was possible to remove the modern accretions and expose the original wall. In this part a doorway into the eastern part of the southern aisle was found (Plate I, section A-A). The threshold, door sockets, and door steps are preserved (Plate III B).⁽²⁾ An entrance in this location is not usual in the Byzantine church, although not without precedent.

The inside face of the outside walls is rather rough and uneven. This face was covered with a layer of plaster, as indicated by traces found on the walls. Sizeable sections of plaster are found attaching the mosaic to the north wall in the north aisle.

The Mosaic Floor

A large section (circa 3.50 meters by 9.50 meters) of mosaic floor has been preserved in the north aisle (Plate IV B). Traces of mosaic found in other parts of the building (Plate I) indicate that the entire floor area was covered with a mosaic pavement. The floor level of the church is remarkably uniform (as indicated by the levels recorded on Plate I).

² In the case of both doorways, traces of mosaic floor were found laid directly up to the threshold.

The large rectangular panel in the north aisle contains a series of interlocking figures, rather simple in appearance but intricately executed (Plate V A). To the west of this rectangular panel is a square panel containing a large circle surrounded by eight small squares each containing a different interlocking design (Plate IV B). It seems that there may have been a picture of an animal or bird within the circle. The damage in this part of the floor may have been caused by iconoclasm. The interlocking feature in the mosaic can also be seen in the borders surrounding the panels.

Not very much of the mosaic floor in the nave of the church has been preserved. Two portions can be seen in plates V B and VI A. In contrast to the design in the north aisle, this pattern shows vines, leaves, and clusters of grapes. Such vintage scenes are not uncommon in Byzantine mosaics.⁽³⁾ It *cannot* be ascertained from these preserved portions whether any figures of birds, animals, or humans were found in the floor of the nave.

A portion of the mosaic floor in the south aisle is preserved near the doorway in the south wall (Plate VI B). The design is preserved near the doorway in the south wall (Plate VI B). The design is an interlocking one, just as in the north aisle; however, the pattern is slightly different. The floor in the northeast room was made of large white tesserae. In the northwest corner of the building traces of mosaic were found. However, the underlayment of the mosaic in the western part of the north aisle has been extensively preserved. It consists of a layer of small stones. Strikingly, an intercolumnar mosaic has

been preserved in the south row of pillars (Plate I).

Date of the Church

No inscriptions were preserved in the mosaic floor or in any of the lithic remains of the building. Likewise, no coins were found in the excavation. Numerous sherds from the Byzantine period were found in the debris just above the floor level of the church. Further refinement regarding the date of the building must rely upon dated parallels.

The Church of Lot and Procopius at Mekhayyat, containing vintage scenes similar to the church under consideration, is dated by inscriptions in the first half of the sixth century.⁽⁴⁾ Likewise, other mosaics in Transjordan from the sixth century have similar features. A date in the first half of the sixth century for the Salayta District church does not conflict with the archaeological remains uncovered or the parallels known.

Conclusion

The discovery of the Salayta District church in Madaba adds new evidence regarding early Christianity in Transjordan. This is the thirteenth Byzantine church to be identified in Madaba. As in this case, most of these churches are large in size and contained extensive mosaic pavements. This testifies to two significant features of this Christian community. First of all, it was a large Christian community which worshipped in these buildings, nearly all of which were contemporaneous. This observation becomes all the more striking when one considers the numerous

³ For example, the mosaic in the nave of the Church of Lot and Procopius at Mekhayyat (Bagatti and Saller, *The Town of Nebo* (Jerusalem, 1949), p. 57 and Plate 14.2). Similarly, also the mo-

saic at Swafiyeh (ADAJ 15 (1970), p. 26 and Plate I). For another example from Madaba, see U. Lux, ZDPV 83 (1967), pp. 170-72 and Plates 29 and 30).

⁴ Bagatti and Saller, *op. cit.*, p. 216.

churches in villages in the vicinity of Madaba. As more and more of these churches are identified, one becomes more and more impressed with the large Christian population in this area.

A second features of the Christian community that emerges is its wealth. These sizeable churches had impressive architecture and elaborate mosaic floors. These congregations must have been very prosperous to construct and maintain these structures.

Gradually a fuller picture of early Christianity in Transjordan is developing. Further archaeological research will provide valuable data for the study of the life, work, wealth, theology, society, and worship of the Christians who built these churches with their beautiful mosaics. It is hoped that the Salayta District church may be a contribution to this understanding of early Christianity in Transjordan.

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LIST OF PLATES

- Plate I -- Floor plan of Salayta District Church in Madaba.
- Plate II -- General view of Salayta District Church as seen looking west.
- Plate III -- Outside face of the east wall of church.
- Plate IV -- Western doorway, partially blocked up.
- Plate V -- Doorway in south wall of church.
- Plate VI -- Mosaic floor in north aisle of church.
- Plate VII -- Large rectangular panel in north aisle of church.
- Plate VIII -- Square panel in western part of the north aisle.
- Plate IX -- A fragment of the mosaic floor in the nave of the church.
- Plate X -- Another fragment of the mosaic floor in the nave of the church.
- Plate XI -- Fragment of mosaic floor in the south aisle.